

*Alberto Rey*

*My Private Addiction to Lies*



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*Big Orbit Gallery  
Buffalo, New York*

*Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center  
Buffalo, New York*

*November 13, 1999 to January 15, 2000*

Big Orbit Gallery and Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center are pleased to host the dual-site exhibition *My Private Addiction to Lies* by Cuban-born, Western New York artist Alberto Rey. This showing comprises a dynamic survey of the artist's most recent work and is accompanied by a comprehensive essay entitled "Reappropriating Paradise" by Dr. Johanna Drucker. The curators and artist would like to extend their personal gratitude to Johanna for her insightful comments and contribution to this exhibition and catalogue.

For the last twelve years the work of Alberto Rey has attempted to reconcile the disparate pieces of his Cuban-American identity through an uneasy fusion. Born to Cuban exiles who received political asylum through Mexico and moved to America when he was a child, Rey has been limited to a remote sensing of Cuban culture, its history and private legacies. This traverse-gazing onto his heritage creates an underlying sense of longing and desire in his work. It also illuminates the gaps and subtle inaccuracies inherent within the formation of his cultural identity, an identity cultivated by his family's exile and search for a community in America. As a result, Rey purposefully riddles his work with spliced together narratives and hybrid images.

At the core of Rey's work is a romantic observation on the multiple forces acting upon the development of personal identity and history, past and present. Rey's depictions of his homeland and ancestry resonate with an inherently Cuban cosmography, and with his ever-present sense of isolation from it. As an insider/outsider to the native Cuban experience, his early exposure to Cuban culture was made real only through interpolated ancestral narratives and then only echoed by other Cuban-Americans. Like the view down the wrong end of

a telescope, Rey's perspective on his past is lucid, showing clear evidence of the Cuban condition, but is vignettted by the effects of distance and time. While highly charged with personal invocations of Cuban identity, his vision has been moderated by the missing context provided by direct experience.

In 1998, thirty-six years after leaving as a child, Alberto Rey returned to Cuba for the first time. During his visit Rey absorbed a flood of direct experience which forced him to contemplate the depictions of "reality" and "nostalgia" expressed in his work. The new perspective achieved as a result of his trip compelled Rey to see himself and his work in a different light. Rey now states that his artistic practice results in the "creation of lies" – born out of a need to embrace a reality which is not necessarily the truth. Although Rey continues to struggle with this revelation, his belief in the artistic process's power to bring fulfillment, spirituality, and personal understanding remains strong. For personal history is history continually and ultimately defined by the self, shaped by but not relegated to one's culture, family narrative, and collective experience. On this course of self discovery, Rey continues to elucidate his artistic vision. His challenge to the viewer is in exposing the mediating forces acting upon cultural identification and revealing the precarious realities which add up to a sense of self. Ultimately, Rey would contend, identity can only be perceived as a sort of Platonic absolute, existing, but only indirectly experienced in the shadows.

– *Martin Kruck, Co-Curator, Big Orbit Gallery*  
– *Sean J. Donaher, Director, Big Orbit Gallery*  
– *Sara Kellner, Visual Arts Director, Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center*

## Reappropriating Paradise

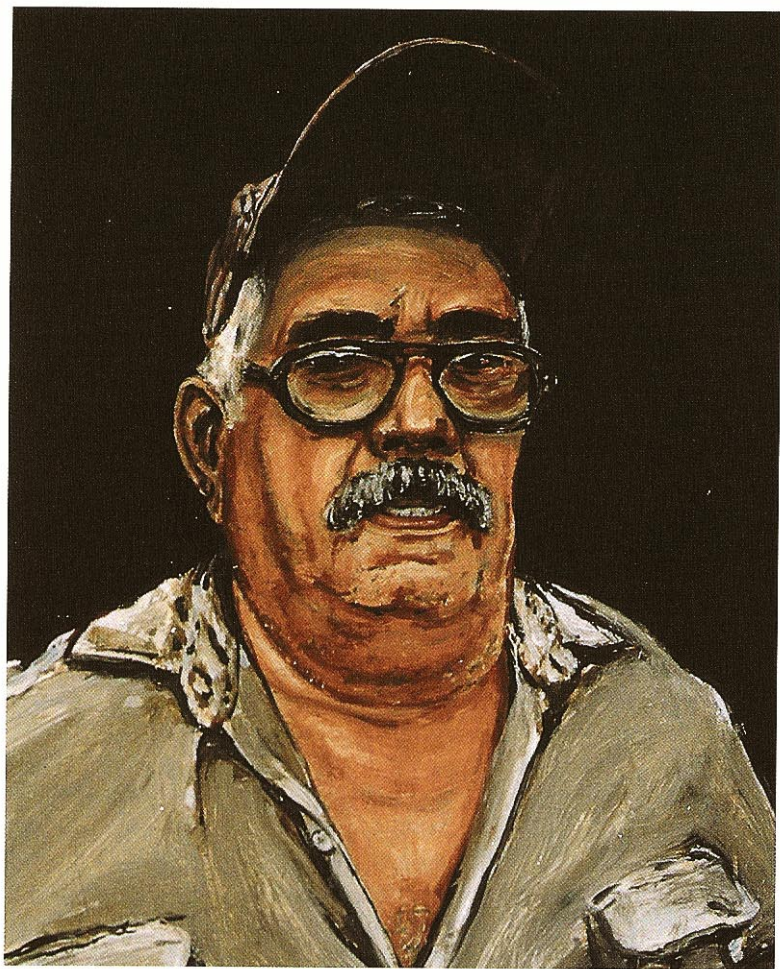
The visionary quality of Alberto Rey's work carries a strong emotional charge in its blend of nostalgia, tradition, and innovation. Rey's imagery is pervaded with an atmospheric moodiness that immediately betrays its themes of loss and faith, distance and recuperation. Throughout the monochrome landscapes and focused features of his portraits comes a sense of intense longing. It is as if the entire of his practice were charged with the task of compensation for a paradise long lost and barely able to be conjured into existence through the fraught exercise of appropriation. In the current exhibition at Hallwalls and Big Orbit, Rey is exhibiting work from three series: Cuban Portraits, Studio Retablos, and Appropriated Memories. Each of these series shares with the others a hybrid aesthetic sensibility through which Rey is enacting a cultural and private act of suture, trying to piece back together a fractured reality that finally cannot be reconstituted across the breaks of history, politics, and time.

The drive toward these acts of recuperation, the reappropriation of a lost paradise, is rooted in Rey's personal experience as the child of Cuban exiles. He left Cuba as a three-year old child in 1963, and so his memories of that country are constituted almost entirely through the images conjured by his parents and other members of an exile community

hostile to Fidel Castro's revolutionary projects. For this community, Cuba is the Garden from which they have been banished. The two projected images that Rey uses to frame the Hallwalls space makes this clear: a waving palm tree against a tropical horizon faces the image of an endlessly dripping faucet, an image of despair, futility, and waste. Rather than address the politics of these mythologies—those of the paradise lost, the reality regained, the nostalgic tales and emotionally charged accounts, Rey lets the gap remain. A huge, submerged continent of historical reality, the period of the last four decades, lurks beneath Rey's images. Rather than address the discrepancies between the dreams of his parents' generation and the realities of contemporary life, he chooses a path of aesthetic reconciliation at the level of imagery.

Painting becomes the means by which Rey remakes his own connection to the mythic past, not the real, nor the Real, but to some image of a Cuba from landscape paintings of another century, to modes of portraiture steeped in convention and tradition, and to the religious imagery that provides a link between the secular and the spiritual. But these are all motifs of linking, traversing, crossing a gap that is so large, so enormous, so immeasurably unexamined that its potency increases. There is always a space "between" in Rey's work, even in the way the traditional sources combine with his

contemporary sensibility in an uneasy but richly tense hybrid aesthetic. The history of modern western art has never had a comfortable relation with the kind of iconography that Rey borrows from Cuban and Latin traditions, nor with the longings he expresses in the black and white landscapes of a country from which he is displaced by temporal and geographical distance, nor with the religious imagery and faith that appear in various of his series. And for this reason Rey is particularly interesting at this moment in time, since his work doesn't fit within modern traditions or within the formulaic terms of postmodernism's easy refusal of those critical frameworks. If postmodernism challenged modern autonomy with a critical sense of contingency, and work of artists engaged with identity politics challenged the generalizations of postmodern criticism with a sense of specific history, then Rey challenges the secular politics of contemporary art with a resistant faith and carefully considered nostalgia, verging on escapism. In place of direct engagement with the politics of contemporary Cuba, Rey investigates the spaces of displaced memory, the topoi of a paradise recalled through the longings of others, mediated by their loss. Imagery becomes a form of compensation as well as a place to inhabit, a site of revisitation with all the attendant associations of a spiritual pilgrimage invoked by such a term.



Alberto – Agramonte, Cuba  
1998 – 1999  
Oil on Plaster  
15.5 x 12 inches.



Nena – Agramonte, Cuba  
1998 – 1999  
Oil on Plaster  
15.5 x 12 inches.

Rey is aware of these contradictions: the title, Appropriated Memories, by which he refers to the large, black and white painted landscapes on plaster make this clear. As he himself has stated, the very fact that they are in black and white is to emphasize their unreality, their distance from any belief in the landscapes they depict. They are images of images, made more remote through the toned down visual quality, the subdued mood in which they are rendered. But they also acquire a magnetic intensity in their monochrome depth, luring the eye into their spaces as if into a land of Shades, some lost geography towards which the spirit yearns with an almost inexplicable sadness and appeal. What can be found there in the meandering hills and shadowy brush? What can be recovered from the ashen seeming hills covered by smoky clouds and wraithlike fogs? The loss of color suggests a loss of life, a reification of some past that cannot be revived through mere illusion. And yet, there rises from these reworked landscapes of a nineteenth-century sensibility a feeling of destiny that was always part of the imperial relation to pastoral lands. Paradise was always fated to the Fall, and the panoramic sweep of the visual regime that brought the landscapes of the Caribbean, Latin, and South America into the painters gaze was always bound up with the regime of conquest and exploitation. And though Rey conjures these images from a personal desire for connection to a past that he

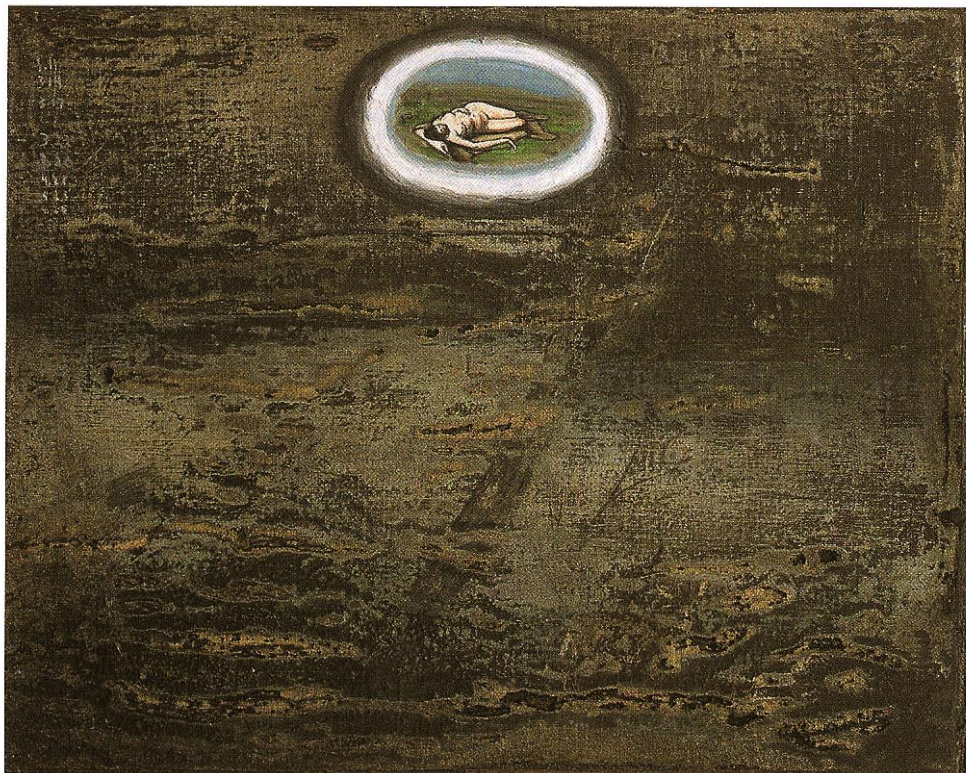
can relate to through aesthetic means, the cultural forces that work through him and on him are a poignant part of the visual effect. If personal continuity depends upon such elaborate illusions, then what does it produce apart from a tempered sense of loss? The answer seems to be the motivation towards art, towards the creation of images that at least express the difficulties of these dilemmas within personal and collective experience.

The Cuban Portraits, by their intimate scale and immediate humanity, suggest another use of tradition and appropriation. Here Rey borrows stylistically from Hermenegildo Bustos, a Mexican painter of the latter half of the 19th century whose religious paintings, still lifes, and portraits display an engaging realism tempered by a degree of sophisticated reduction and simplicity. In the portraits in particular, an attention to character, careful drawing, particularities of dress, expression, and posture indicate Bustos's dedication to his subjects and desire to present them with as much depth and insight as possible. There is also, in Bustos, an almost indescribable quality of distance from the mainstream western models of portraiture to which he is clearly indebted, but to which he has added the slightly flattened space and literal inscription of detail that show his respect for folk and popular traditions. This visual hybridization, subtle but distinctive, marks its own colonial

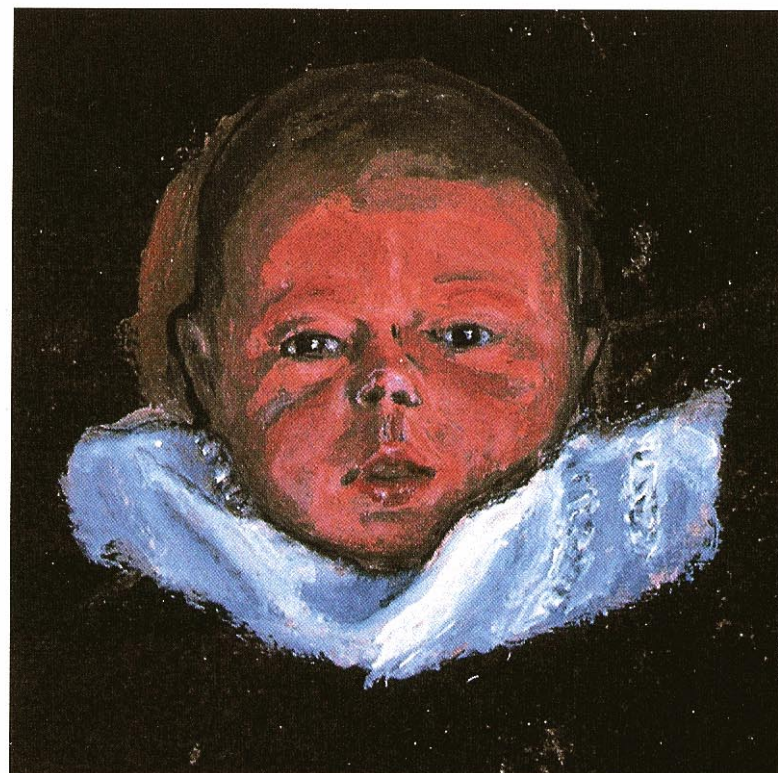
position as one of appropriation and transformation. The modes of western tradition have been absorbed and altered to reflect and embody a new community identity within Mexican society. It's not surprising then that this style would appeal to Rey, who has adapted it for his own use in his Studio Retablos as well as in his portraits.

The Portraits are highly contemporary images, moving in their immediacy as well as in their evident echoing of historical models and traditions. The faces that look out at us from this series are living faces, of our time in their dress, their style, their unabashed meeting of our gaze. The formality and care of Rey's approach doesn't diminish their frankness, instead it presents the dignity of each of these individuals while subtly marking their distance from the anglo mainstream of American culture. There is a quality of inflected realism in this work, rather than a photographic neutrality, so that Olga—Miami or Carlos—Miami are clearly shown within a Hispanic tradition of imagemaking, not neutrally observed. This gives the lie, of course, to photorealist objectivity, demonstrating the mediated character of any portrait, but Rey's point is to give these images a specific cast, one that speaks from and to the community of displaced Cubans whose faces he has so intimately observed.

The Studio Retablos are compelling paintings, searching, in Rey's words,



**Studio Retablo: Mexican Figure**  
1998 – 1999  
Oil on Found Painting  
14.5 x 17 inches.



**Studio Retablo: Daughter – Detail**  
1998 – 1999  
Oil on Found Painting  
18 x 22 inches.

“to connect the mundane with the spiritual.” Like the series of Madonnas of Western New York (1992-95) in which Rey placed the image of the Caridad de Cobre, a Latin version of the Virgin Mary, into the landscapes around Fredonia and other areas of the state, the Studio Retablos take on the difficult and interesting project of trying to engage directly with faith. There is no easy visual form readily available for this within the history of the avant-garde, or even of the softer humanistic traditions that kept various forms of figurative realism alive through the 20th century. Resolutely secular, even when concerned with spiritual issues, the modern tradition eschewed all religious imagery and iconography in the name of a formal autonomy outside the bounds of traditional religion or its visual history. The most spiritual art of the early 20th century took formal abstraction as its lingua franca, posing the notion of transcendence in terms of visual universals far from the figurative Christian depictions that had so long dominated western art. This poses a serious and interesting problem for contemporary artists intent upon placing themselves at the intersection of the conceptual frameworks of contemporary art and a desire to portray religious faith, in this case Christian faith, in iconographic terms.

Familiar with the towns in New York state, Rey used them as the landscapes into which visions could appear. Rey

paints a madonna of the freeway, without irony or cartoonlike humor, but with the genuine realization that it is only within the secular that the miraculous appears. This is Rey’s real strength, which is his willingness to make us have to face that faith within contemporary terms, to see the need for understanding that if and only if we can accept the place of the miraculous within the mundane is there any chance at all for its survival. To create such visions, using the objects and items of his studio environment, the ordinary icons of a daily life, floating in their vignettes of light above a familiar horizon, is to engage with serious questions of spiritual life in a contemporary frame—and of the difficulty of finding artistic means with which to engage it. The work in this series titled Studio Retablo: Daughter carries the additional poignancy of Rey’s fascination with his newborn child’s angelic visage. Painted in the most formal, almost austere palette, like the official image of the daughter of some colonial governor or minor royalty sent to rule in the New World, the face of the infant rises from the white cloth that swaddles her neck. Iconic, beatific, floating, her small features become the very image of that place where the ordinary meets the miraculous in the mere fact of being. But it is of course Rey’s gaze, and his ability to express his faith in the appreciation of these moments that is really envisioned here: it is his images that sustain the longing and

capacity to believe.

Faith is often associated with the idea of a leap—a necessary leap, perhaps, over the too literal inquiries that might block its power. Rey is exemplary in this regard, and the work here demonstrates his capacity to leap over obstacles of history, political reality, aesthetic distance, and other difficulties on the way to realizing his own vision as an artist. Whether his faith can be sustained, or whether he will have at some point to wrestle with the demons that wait to rise from the unexamined territories between his longings and his realities remains to be seen. But that he has rendered visible the struggles and issues through which he works is remarkable and unusual, and the vision he manifests has profound commitment in its contradictions and convictions. This is work of the heart, and of the soul, and expressive of the deepest needs for artistic vision. But it is also of its time, and there are no simple means by which to reconcile the need for expression with the historical layers through which Rey’s visions are appropriated and reworked in an effort to recover—not Paradise, which is inexorably lost—but some ongoing relation to its place as a memory and an image.

**Dr. Johanna Drucker,**  
**Robertson Professor of Media Arts,**  
**University of Virginia, Charlottesville**



Artist's Studio, Center Street, Fredonia, New York, 1999

Born in Cuba in 1960, Rey received political asylum through Mexico in 1963 and moved to Miami, Florida in 1965. In 1967 his family moved to Barnesboro, Pennsylvania. Rey received his B.F.A. from Indiana University of Pennsylvania and his M.F.A. from the University of Buffalo in 1987. Throughout the following years he traveled extensively to Spain, Italy, Morocco and Mexico, and while attending Harvard University, taught in Boston, MA at Lincoln-Sudbury High School, The Art Institute of Boston, New England School of Art and Design, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. In 1989 he moved to Dunkirk, NY to accept a teaching position at the State University of New York at Fredonia and married Janeil Strong. In 1996 Rey became the Director/Curator at the Chautauqua Center for the Visual Arts at the Chautauqua Institution. In 1997 he was appointed to the Visual Arts Panel for the New York State Council on the Arts and the following year was appointed to the Artist's Advisory Panel of the New York Foundation for the Arts. In 1998, Janeil gave birth to their first child, Graciela Victoria Rey and later that year Rey returned to Cuba for the first time in 36 years. Alberto Rey currently lives in Fredonia, works as a full professor of art at the State University of New York at Fredonia, and has had over 80 exhibitions in the United States, Mexico, and Spain. The artist wishes to thank his wife Janeil and daughter Graciela, as well as, Sean Donaher, Sara Kellner, Martin Kruck, and Johanna Drucker.

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**Big Orbit Gallery**  
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 Gallery Hours  
 Thursday – Sunday  
 12 - 5 p.m.

**Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center**  
 2495 Main Street, Suite 425  
 Buffalo, NY 14214  
 716.835.7362  
 Gallery Hours  
 Tuesday – Friday  
 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

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